

‘What the ____?’

**On the use of ellipsis and silence in sarcastic
media and electoral discourse in Hong Kong**

Brian WAI and Foong Ha YAP

Hong Kong Polytechnic University



Presented at the 7th International Free Linguistics Conference (FLC-7)
at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University

September 27, 2013



Introduction

- In periods of political tension or scandals, politicians will face harsh criticism from the media and their rivals (Bitiniene 2007).
- Serving as an extralegal check on governments and politicians, news media see it as their duty to use political satire to reflect the public's disappointment, disagreement or anger (Barnett 2002).
- Politicians will also voice criticism to discredit their rivals during intense election campaigns.

The socio-economic background of China

- Mainland's nominal gross domestic product has grown five times for the past 12 years.
- To cool down the overheated economy, the central government will exercise *occasional macroeconomic regulation and control* to achieve a soft landing. Such action tends to become a hot topic to economic and political observers.
- Newspaper commentaries and op-eds provide a forum for the observers as well as the public to reflect their worries or disagreement on this direct government intervention in different areas such as money supply, property market or stock exchange.

The socio-political background of Hong Kong

- Hong Kong is currently undergoing a vigorous **process of democratization** that is highly publicized in the media.
- There has been a series of **controversial issues** in recent years:
 - e.g. 2010 political reform package
 - unauthorized building works of government officials
 - unpopular national education curriculum
- The **rise of many new political parties + independent Legislative Council (LegCo) candidates**

Objectives

- To investigate how Hong Kong politicians discredit rivals through verbal indirectness strategies and mitigation of face-threats in tense election competition.
- To explore the strategies employed by news media to express public dissatisfaction through a critical and attention- drawing, yet playful and humourous tone.

Data

- Televised debates
 - Chief Executive election debates in March 2012
 - Examples for ellipsis and silence strategies
- Newspaper commentaries and op-eds
 - *Jake's View* in the South China Morning Post on 30 April, 2013.
 - Examples for sarcasm and ellipsis strategies

Ellipsis

- Ellipsis is **the omission of words that are recoverable or understood from the situational context or the surrounding text** (Carter and McCarthy 2006).
- There are two major approaches to the study of ellipsis (Spenader & Hendriks 2006).
- **Syntactic Approach**
 - Ellipsis refers to the deletion of linguistic material by the speaker, often just mechanical steps within the generation process.
 - It focuses on the elision of Determiner Phrase, Noun Phrase or Verb Phrase .
- **Pragmatic approach**
 - This approach focuses on how speakers select what material can be left unarticulated while still preserving recoverability given the context.
 - Antecedents of the elided material can be in any form and not just restricted to DP, NP and VP.
 - It also allows the speaker to express something that otherwise violates syntactic constraints. **The generation of ellipsis makes reference to information rather than syntactic structure.**

Ellipsis as a Politeness Strategy

- **Face wants** is the fundamental motivation in interpersonal interaction (Leech 1983).
- In political discourse, the speaker often praises oneself or criticizes others to persuade the electorate to support him.
- Both moves are dispreferred moves and can be face-threatening. Raising of oneself implies lowering of others and criticism damages the positive face of others.

Off-record Politeness

- Brown and Levinson (1987) explained that a speaker goes off record in speech so that the speaker cannot be held to have committed himself to one particular intent.
- Off-record strategies include metaphor and irony, rhetorical questions, understatement ... all kinds of hints as to what a speaker wants or means to communicate (1987:69)
- Ellipsis is often used to mitigate the Face Threatening Acts in interaction.
- We will analyze two examples:
 - ‘Doing Self-Praising’
 - ‘Denigrating the Rival’

2012 Chief Executive Candidates Forum

- Date: 19 March 2012
- Venue: Chief Executive (CE) Election Committee Meeting
- Speaker: Henry Tang, CY Leung and Albert Ho
- Audience: Election Committee members only



- **Context:**
 - CY Leung had earlier proposed that the minimum number of nominations needed from members of the Election Committee before a potential candidate can run for the CE election should be reviewed. This proposal was made after CY Leung managed to get enough nominations only after a lot of persuasion to various Election Committee members.
 - Henry Tang then responded, apparently in agreement with the proposal, but uses this opportunity to also engage in self-praising. However, since self-praising is a dispreferred move, he deploys a number of indirect verbal strategies, including the use of **generic and impersonal reference, followed by silence and an elliptical construction.**

2012 Chief Executive Candidates Forum (01:19:47 – 01:20:35)

- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PjttMs931Ws>



2012 Chief Executive Candidates Forum (Henry Tang Speech)



Impersonal reference

Politeness strategies (1)

07: 一般 一 個 人 從政 一 段 時間
jat1bun1 jat1 go3 jan4 cung4zing3 jat1 dyun6 si4gaan3
generally one CL person engage.in.politics one CL time

'Generally, when **a person** has engaged in politics for a certain period,'

08: 通常 係 會 應該 凝聚 倒
tung1soeng4 hai6 wui5 jing1goi1 jing4zeoi6 dou2
usually COP FUT should converge PRT

Impersonal reference

09: 某 一 啲 群組 嘅 支持 嘅 (暫停...掌聲)
mau5 jat1 di1 kwan4zou2 ge3 zi1ci4 ge3
certain one CL group ATTR support SFA

'he should normally have obtained support from **certain groups**.' [Pause (00:01)
+ Applause (00:01)]

10: 我 係 ... (微笑)...(掌聲)
ngo5 hai6
1SG COP ...

'I am ...' [Speaker smiles (00:00:30) then audience applaud (00:05:30)]

Adverbs of frequency with
generic interpretation

Politeness strategies (2)

07: 一般 一 個 人 從政 一 段 時間
jat1bun1 jat1 go3 jan4 cung4zing3 jat1 dyun6 si4gaan3
generally one CL person engage.in.politics one CL time

‘**Generally**, when a person has engaged in politics for a certain period,’

08: 通常 係 會 應該 凝聚 倒
tung1soeng4 hai6 wui5 jing1goi1 jing4zeoi6 dou2
usually COP FUT should converge PRT

09: 某 一 啲 群組 嘅 支持 嘅 (暫停...掌聲)
mau5 jat1 di1 kwan4zou2 ge3 zi1ci4 ge3
certain one CL group ATTR support SFA

‘he should **normally** have obtained support from certain groups.’ [Pause (00:01) + Applause (00:01)]

10: 我 係 ... (微笑)...(掌聲)
ngo5 hai6
1SG COP ...

‘I am ...’ [Speaker smiles (00:00:30) then audience applaud (00:05:30)]

Politeness strategies (3)

07: 一般 一 個 人 從政 一 段 時間
jat1bun1 jat1 go3 jan4 cung4zing3 jat1 dyun6 si4gaan3
 generally one CL person engage.in.politics one CL time

Antecedent

‘Generally, when a person has engaged in politics for a certain period,’

08: 通常 係 會 應該 凝聚 倒
tung1soeng4 hai6 wui5 jing1goi1 jing4zeoi6 dou2
 usually COP FUT should converge PRT

09: 某 一 啲 群組 嘅 支持 嘅 (暫停...掌聲)
mau5 jat1 di1 kwan4zou2 ge3 zi1ci4 ge3
 certain one CL group ATTR support SFA
 Silence
 (sentence boundary)

‘he should normally **have obtained support from certain groups.**’ [Pause (00:01) + Applause (00:01)]

10: 我 係 ... (微笑)...(掌聲)
ngo5 hai6
 1SG COP ...
 Silence
 (Nominal Phrase Ellipsis)

Highlights broad scope interpretation

‘I am ...’ [Speaker smiles (00:00:30) then audience applaud (00:05:30)]

Self-praising and politeness

- In lines 7-9, the speaker (Henry Tang) first concurs with his rival's proposal, but then proceeds to do self-praising.
- However, self-praising is a violation of the Maxim of Modesty (Leech 1983).
- As such, Henry Tang uses various linguistic devices to mitigate these face-threatening acts (FTAs).
- He uses **indefinite and impersonal referents** (e.g. *jat1 go3 jan4* 'a person', *mau5 jat1 di1 kwan4zou2* 'certain groups') and **adverbs of frequency that highlight a generic interpretation** (e.g. *jat1bun1* 'generally', *tung1soeng4* 'usually').
- This is followed by a **pause**, with **almost immediate applause** from the audience, signaling that they understood that the speaker counts himself among the eligible candidates.
- Henry Tang tries to follow up with an explicit claim about himself, but aborts doing so, and instead smiles, apparently indicating his recognition that sometimes things are better left unsaid. This is appreciated by the audience and brings great applause from the audience. Henry Tang has succeeded with his use of ellipsis and silence.

Role of silence in discourse integration involving ellipsis

Pragmatic vs Syntactic Ellipsis

- Main Assertion Hypothesis:

a. John said Fred *went to Europe* and Mary did too.

b. John *said Fred went to Europe.* Mary did too.



- When a **sentence boundary intervenes** as in Ellipsis (b), the **discourse representation** is more dominant than the **syntactic representation**.
 - Discourse representation involves broad scope; syntactic representation in this case involves immediate adjacency.
- Crucially, after a sentence has been parsed, the syntactic representation becomes less salient, and the discourse representation becomes relatively more salient.

(Clifton & Frazier 2010)

Role of silence in discourse integration involving ellipsis

- Consistent with the Main Assertion Hypothesis, research shows that **silence**, occurring as intentional pauses in interaction, can be used to allow the hearer(s) **more time to complete the inferences** intended by the speaker (Kurzon 1995).
- At the end of line 9, Henry Tang uses **silence as a sentence boundary** to focus the attention on the substance of his criticism in lines 7 to 9. In this way, he helps them to **retrieve the speaker's implication from the preceding sentence**.

Sarcasm

- Because sarcasm involves ambiguous interpretations, it readily serves as an **off-record communication act** that performs a face-saving function (Brown and Levinson 1987).
- Kiley and Shuttleworth (1971) and Inge (1990) further define sarcasm as “a literary manner which blends a **critical attitude** with **humor and wit** to the end that human institutions or **humanity may be improved**” and it can be understood as “a **gentle** but sometimes **bitter** and **angry corrective**” which carries the primary purpose of challenging the authority or complacency.
- We will analyse 3 examples from the headline of a commentary in the South China Morning Post (April 30, 2013) in terms of:
 - How sarcasm performs face-saving function.
 - How sarcasm reflects the public dissatisfaction for the “unheard populace” using playful and attention-drawing strategies.
 - How the reader can retrieve the intended unsaid interpretation through shared knowledge.

Sarcastic headline with ellipsis



Jake's View

Jake Van Der Kamp

Tuesday, 30 April, 2013, 4:28am



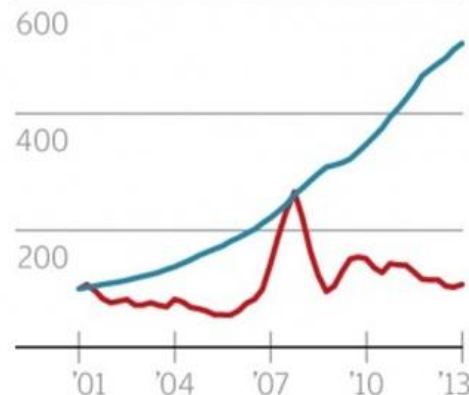
What the ...? A decade of growth but no sign of a fair share

The mainland economy is five times as big as it was 12 years ago but Shanghai's stock market has gone nowhere amid barriers to profitability

What the...? (No 1)

Indices of April 2001 = 100
(Yuan terms)

— China GDP
— Shanghai market

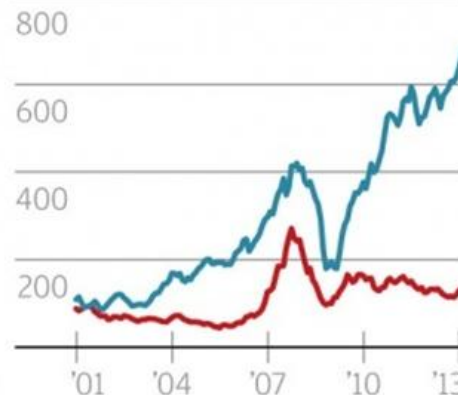


Source: CEIC Data

What the...? (No 2)

Indices of April 2001 = 100
(US\$ terms)

— Asean markets
— Shanghai market



SCMP

Sarcasm- A corrective comment to the authority

- The mainland economy has grown fivefold while the Asean stock market index also has a 650-percent growth for the past 12 years (2001-2012).
- However, the sluggish Shanghai stock market index remains almost the same during this period, except for once reaching the climax of 200-percent growth right before the sub-prime mortgage crisis triggered by the Lehmann Brothers Holdings' bankruptcy in 2008.
- To boost the sluggish stock market performance, the new chairman of *The China Securities Regulatory Commission* recently published a new guideline stipulating that stock-focused funds must spend at least 80 per cent of their assets to buy stocks, up from the current requirement of 60 per cent.
- Though the direct government intervention in the stock market is legitimate under the controlled economy, it is likely to draw unfavourable comment from capitalist economic observers, who may think that one-off boost is possible but it will inevitably erode the investors' confidence in Shanghai stock exchange.

Sarcasm – Politeness in the headlines

- Sarcasm can mute the degree of criticism because the ambiguity and uncertainty as to how to interpret the writer's expression reduces the threat posed by it.
- However, the writer of the commentary has to make the criticism obvious in order to call attention to a problem. The writer cannot compromise himself by simply saying “I did not mean it” in an attempt to save face (Barbe 1995).
- So sarcasm still has a face-saving capacity, but only for the targets and not for the writer.
- To protect his own face, the writer tactfully elides the noun phrase in the exasperated expression “What the ...?” in the commentary headline in order to mitigate the offensiveness of the criticism while he can still cultivate an abrasive attack on his targets.

Sarcasm in playful and evaluative headlines

- The headlines of the modern electronic mass media only partially reflect the content and keep some information suppressed to create an intrigue for the reader” (Lukanina, 2006).
- Through this intrigue, Lewis (2006) reflects that sarcasm actually plays the role of highlighting a point, calling attention to a problem or even cope with the problem in the media discourse.
- In the elliptical headline “What the ...?”, the writer keeps the noun phrase suppressed in order to attract the attention of the reader.
- Consequently, alongside the aim to inform and to attract attention, the intrigue also helps the writer engage with other people who share his values.
- In this way, the writer can represent the “unheard populace” and help them to channel their opinion to the authority.

Sarcasm – A cue of shared opinion

- As Ramos et al. (2009: 4) put it, “because of their cataphoric nature, headlines are powerful devices that guide the reader’s interpretation and assessment of the ‘facts’ they refer to”.
- So headline does not simply perform the informative function, it also encompasses persuasion and impose a certain evaluative edge regarding a political event through commonly shared values in the body text.
- In the elliptical headline “What the ...?”, the writer elides the noun phrase of a foul language (e.g. What the heck? or What the hell?) and provide an implicit clue to his opposition to the government intervention in the Shanghai stock market.
- Through this common English expletive, the reader can easily retrieve the missing cuss-word in the elliptical construction in the headline and readily catch the writer’s evaluation to the issue raised in the article (Booth 1974).
- The clue is then fully elaborated in the body text and becomes an effective form of persuasion to a wide readership as well as to the authority.

Conclusion

- Verbal and written ellipsis in public discourse is a common politeness strategy either in self-praising or in denigrating the opponents in election and criticizing the authority in the media.
- Verbal and written ellipsis, however, work through different mechanisms to enhance their effectiveness.
 - Verbal ellipsis uses silence/pause as a sentence boundary in order to help the hearer to retrieve the speaker's implication from the preceding sentence (**immediate adjacency strategy**).
 - Written ellipsis in newspaper headlines, on the other hand, uses **universal knowledge** (e.g. vocabulary or grammar) and **cataphoric elaborations** (e.g. the information provided in the article following the headline) to establish common ground with the reader and reflect public opinion to officials in power.

Acknowledgement

We wish to gratefully acknowledge funding from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (Internal Competitive Research Grant 2012-2014, HKPU G-YK85) for the research project entitled “Establishing Common Ground in Public Discourse: An Analysis of Electoral Speeches, Press Conferences and Q&A Sessions in Hong Kong”.

We also wish to thank Ariel Chan, Sam Wong, Steven Wong and Vivien Yang for their insightful comments.

References

- Barbe, K. 1995. *Irony in Context*. New York, NY: John Benjamins.
- Barnett, S. 2002) "Will a Crisis in Journalism Provoke a Crisis in Democracy?" *Political Quarterly* 73(4): 400-8.
- Bitiniene A. 2007. *Publicistinis style*. Vilnius: Vilnius Pedagogical University Publishing House.
- Booth, W. 1975. *A Rhetoric of Irony Chicago*: University of Chicago Press.
- Brown, P. and Levinson, S. 1987. *Politeness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Carter, R. and M. McCarthy. 2006. *Cambridge Grammar of English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Clifton, C. Jr., and Frazier, L. 2010. "Imperfect Ellipsis: Antecedents beyond Syntax?". *Syntax* 13(4): 279–297.
- Inge, M. T. 1990. "What's so Funny about the Comics?". *Comics as Culture*, pp. 3-15. Jackson, MS: Univ. Press of Mississippi.
- Kiley, F. and Shuttleworth, J. 1971. *Satire from Aesop to Buchwald*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill.
- Kurzon, D. 1995. The right of silence“ A socio-pragmatic model of interpretation”. *Journal of Pragmatics* 23: 55-69
- Leech, G. 1983. *Principles of pragmatics*. London: Longman.

References (cont'd)

- Lewis, P. 2006. *Cracking Up: American Humor in a Time of Conflict*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lukanin, M.V. 2006. Text Media and Convergence. *Yekaterinburg Political linguistics* 20: 205-214.
- Ramos, R., Martins, P.C. Pereira,S. and Oliveira,M. 2009. Newspaper Headlines: A Methodological Framework For Research Into Representations Of Children At Risk. *Rhetoric in Society*. Leiden: Leiden University.
- Spenader, J., & Hendriks, P. (eds.). 2005. Proceedings of the ESSLLI workshop on cross-modular approaches to ellipsis, Edinburgh, UK: Heriot-Watt University.